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An exploratory study of consumer's perception about relational benefits in retailing

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Abstract

In recent years there has been lot of emphasis on customer-marketer relationship and specifically on the nature and dynamics of these relationships. Relational benefits are strategically important for profitability and competitive advantage of service and retail firms and are mutually beneficial for the customers and service providers/retailers in the long run. Initial researches in the area of relationship marketing studied the derived benefits of relational exchanges from marketers view only. Major work has been done in recent years to discuss various benefits which the consumer receives from this relationship in the form of functional, relational and social benefits. In the present study the findings from the work of Gwinner *et al.*, (1998) were tested in Indian context to understand the perception of Indian consumers with reference to relational benefits: confidence, social and special treatments. The findings of the study reveal interesting facets of the insights of consumer psychology.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been lot of emphasis on customer-marketer relationship and specifically on the nature and dynamics of these relationships (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). The rapid growth of information and communication technologies has enabled the marketers to build and maintain individual relationships with consumers (Jüttner and Wehrli, 1994; Gruen, 1995). Firms strengthen their relations

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with the customers to get competitive advantage and derive various benefits (Aijo, 1996) the primary amongst them is customer retention. According to Anderson and Sullivan (1993) customer retention affects profitability and competitiveness. Complete customer loyalty generates superior long-term financial performance of the firms (Storbacka *et al.*, 1994; Jones and Sasser, 1995), higher future profitability by lowering costs related to defective goods and services (Anderson *et al.*, 1997), buyer's willingness to pay premium price, provide referrals, and use more of the product (Anderson and Mittal, 2000). Customer loyalty is the outcome of customer satisfaction therefore a company must periodically measure customer satisfaction in order to learn how satisfied its customers are (Karna, 2004).

Early empirical studies in the area of relationship marketing examined the derived benefits of relational exchanges from marketers view only (Reichheld, 1993; Bitner, 1995). Several researches have been carried out in recent years to discuss various benefits which the consumers receive from this relationship in the form of functional, relational and social benefits (Bitner, 1995; Mittal and Lassar, 1996; Gwinner *et al.*, 1998). These benefits ultimately result in customer satisfaction which leads to higher levels of customer retention and loyalty (Fornell, 1992; Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Bolton, 1998) and repurchase intentions. Seiders *et al.*, (2005) found that customer and marketplace characteristics play a significant moderating role and relational factors have a positive direct influence on repurchase behaviour.

Relational benefits are strategically important for the profitability and competitive advantage of service firms (Ravald and Gro nroos, 1996; De Wulf *et al.*, 2001; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006) and are mutually beneficial for the customers and service providers in the long run (Dimitriadis, 2011). The long-term engagement of firms and customers in relationships optimizes the expected equity and also increases the predictability of exchange outcomes (Peterson, 1995; Christy *et al.*, 1996). Peterson (1995) argued that money savings is the primary motivation for engaging in relational exchanges. Many researchers have suggested that in many instances, customers also experience non-monetary benefits for staying in a business relationship, especially when there are learning costs associated with switching providers (Klemperer 1987). As both parties interact often they develop a strong bond which becomes more personal over a period of time (Liljander and Strandvik, 1995). In an exploratory study Coulter and Ligas (2000) suggested four phases of these relationships: professional relationships; casual acquaintances; personal acquaintances; and friendships. These feelings of trust and commitment are similar to what occur in personal friendships (Beatty *et al.*, 1996). This commitment of customers with the service provider continues till they are satisfied with the service outcome (Barksdale *et al.*, 1997; Oliver, 1997). In retailing the firms are directly related with the end customer and perform activities which develop stable profitable relationships with the customers, on the other side the customers should also feel identified and appreciated by the firms (Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2004). It is clear that both the marketers and the customers gain by maintaining long term relations.

2. Literature Review

Customers expect from the service provider to offer core services and fulfil their requirements. Only when the service providers meet their expectations the customers show their willingness to cultivate long-term relationships with the firms. This desire has been referred in the marketing literature by many names such as 'loyalty proneness' (Goldman, 1977-1978), 'motivational investment in a relationship' (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987), 'relationship seeking behaviour' (Ellis, 1995), 'relationship motivation' (Beatty *et al.*, 1996), 'relationship friendliness' (Christy *et al.*, 1996) 'receptivity to relationships' (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997), and 'relationship proneness' (De Wulf *et al.*, 2001).

The objective of relationship marketing is to establish, maintain and develop the profitable outcomes of relationship (Gro nroos, 1994). Researchers have proposed various outcomes which are mentioned as the indicators or the benefits of the effectiveness of the relationships from the perspective of the customers. The early works on relational benefits were mainly conceptual explaining that the customers' stay in relationship for trust, money and time savings, and social benefits (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Berry, 1995; Bitner, 1995; Peterson, 1995; Bendapudi and Berry, 1997). In the views of some researchers the indicators of relationship effectiveness are trust, commitment, and behavioural loyalty (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). However the prominent empirical study on the benefits customers receive from long-term relationships above and beyond the core service performance was carried out by Gwinner *et al.*, (1998). In their study Gwinner *et al.*, (1998) identified three types of relational benefits: confidence, social and special treatment benefits. Since then their study has been influencing the subsequent studies where their findings are validated in different service sectors (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Kinard and Capella, 2006; Martin-

Consuegra *et al.*, 2006; Molina *et al.*, 2007).

The other prominent studies in this field also disclose different relational benefits derived by the customers. Reynolds and Beatty (1999) conducted a study in a clothing store keeping customers' relationship with the salespeople and the store in focus. They classified relationship benefits in two categories viz., functional or social. The functional benefits are related to time savings, convenience, fashion advice, and better purchase decisions while social benefits included enjoying the salesperson's company and spending time with the salesperson. Roberts *et al.*, (2003) conceptualized the four dimensions of relationship quality as trust, satisfaction, commitment, and affective conflict. Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, (2002) also holds the similar views and proposed that the core dimensions of relationship quality are satisfaction, trust, and commitment. Dimitriadis, (2011) in his study on bank customers found five relational expectations- special treatment, benevolence, competence, convenience and responsiveness. In the present study the findings from the work of Gwinner *et al.*, (1998) were tested in Indian context to understand the perception of Indian consumers with reference to relational benefits: confidence, social and special treatments. The instrument developed by the Gwinner *et al.*, (1998) was administered on 320 shoppers to assess the reasons behind developing long-term relationship with the retailers. An attempt was also made to measure the preference of Indian shoppers for these benefits. Detailed description of contemporary works explaining the relational benefits: confidence, social and special treatment, is mentioned in subsequent paragraphs.

2.1. Confidence

Confidence of one party in the other party is the resultant of trust which plays an important role in relational exchange (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trust could also be defined as the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence (Moorman *et al.*, 1992). Trust and confidence have been used synonymously in this study and are quoted interchangeably. Trust stimulates long term commitment (Ganesan, 1994) and over a period the relationship between customer and service provider becomes more trusting and dependent upon one another (Czepiel, 1990; Price and Arnould, 1999). When both parties interact often they develop a strong bond which becomes more personal over a period of time (Liljander and Strandvik, 1995) and is expected to last long. These feelings of trust and commitment are similar to what occur in personal friendships (Beatty *et al.*, 1996). The customers become more comfortable in interaction with the provider and might start seeking for advice during the conversations (Crosby *et al.*, 1990).

Trust ensures that one party does not exploit the other party and take undue advantage of its dominance in the relation even when such behaviour could not be monitored (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). The service provider can win the confidence of the customer in the relationship by keeping the promises (Groenroos 1990; Bitner 1995). The customer stays in a relationship and accepts the short-term mistakes of the seller despite the availability of competitive alternatives (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Bitner 1995) just because of trust and commitment in service provider (Hedrick *et al.*, 2007). Trust enhances the performance of the firm by improving the production process and reducing the transaction costs (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sako, 1998). With the reduced transaction cost the firms can provide highest level of service at reasonable price.

2.2. Social Benefits

Many researchers have reported the social benefits that the customers receive from long-term relations with the service providers (Czepiel, 1990; Berry 1995). Social benefits include feelings of familiarity, personal recognition, friendship, rapport, and social support (Barnes, 1997; Berry, 1995). Goodwin (1994) assigned a special term "service communality" to explain that the experience of friendship which occurs in service relationship is an unsought bonus, for the customers, in addition to core service. Patterson and Smith (2003) concluded that the fear of losing social relationship act as switching barrier and increases the probability of customer's stay with their present service provider.

2.3. Special Treatment

Special or preferential treatment is the practice of providing elevated social status, recognition and enhanced services beyond the standard firm value propositions to the special customers. Special treatment plays an important role in customer satisfaction and retention as the customers compare themselves with "similar others" (Xia *et al.*,

2004) and ensure that they get recognition from the service providers. Gwinner *et al.*, (1998) mentioned two components under special treatments: economic and customization. In economic-based special treatment the customers are monetarily benefited and get faster delivery of services under relationship benefits. Customization-based special treatment explains the benefits received by the customers when firms tailor the services to provide personal recognition and extra attention to them. Customers receive such preferential treatment when they established long term relationships with firms (Barnes, 1997; Gronroos and Ojasalo, 2004). Customers start developing commitment toward firms when they receive recognition and reward for their special customer status (Barnes, 1997). Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, (2002) found that special treatment affects positively on relationship commitment and it contributes to loyal purchase behaviours from high-value customers (Zabin and Brebach, 2004).

Thus, it is clear that customers are benefited by maintaining the long term relationship with the service provider. In the literature of relationship marketing very limited explanation about application of relational benefits in Indian context is available. The present study is an attempt to fill this gap and provides an understanding of the perception of Indian consumers regarding relational benefits especially in retail sector.

4. Method

The Study

The study is based on the concept that in the present competitive market where choices are available to a customer, in terms of retail outlets, then what motivates that consumer to maintain a long term relationship with a specific retailer. Relational intentions of consumers are influenced by the type of the service firms they are dealing with, the nature of the services they are availing, and the frequency of their interaction with the service provider. They are also affected by the socio-demographic variables of the customers. The socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, marital status, education, income and occupation (Slama and Tashchian, 1985) play an important role in predicting consumer behaviour. These demographic variables can be used separately or in combinations, such as age and gender. Reichheld (1993) found that demographic variables influence the store patronage behaviour and customer loyalty. In a study Miller and Granzin (1979) found that demographics have an impact on the benefits the consumers look for in their relationship with a store. The present study is exploratory in nature, which was undertaken to measure the perception of consumers regarding relational benefits which they derive by patronizing a retail outlet. The present study also attempts to explore the impact of three demographic variables viz., gender, age, and occupation with respect to relational benefits perception of customers. Gender is an important basis for product market segmentation and customer classification (Nysveen *et al.*, 2005) and it plays a vital role in predicting the behaviour of the individual. Age influences the customers' perception as young customers maintain relationships with the organization with different expectations while middle-aged consumers are perhaps motivated by some other factors. Occupation is also likely to affect the customer perception. Service class customers may look for confidence, trust and financial benefits in terms of value for money while business class customers may go for social considerations like status and personal treatment.

In present study, there were three independent variables: gender, age and occupation- each having two levels. The variable gender was classified into male and female. The variable age was classified into two discrete levels of young-adults (20-30 years) and middle-aged (35-45 years). The variable occupation was also segmented into two levels of business category and service category. The effect of independent variables was examined on the dependent variable i.e., relational benefit. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 320 respondents to assess the importance of different relational benefits in a retail setup. The findings of Gwinner *et al.*, (1998) have provided newer insights in the area of relationship marketing and the scale developed by them was administered in this study on 320 respondents to understand its relevance in Indian context.

Hypotheses: Following null hypotheses were framed to measure the perception of the customers in terms of relational benefits:

H_{01} : Male and female customers do not differ in their relational benefit perceptions.

H_{02} : Young-adults and middle-aged customers do not differ in their relational benefit perceptions.

H_{03} : Business and service class customers do not differ in their relational benefit perceptions.

H_{04} : Gender and age do not interact to affect the relational benefit perceptions of the customers.

H_{05} : Gender and occupation do not interact to affect the relational benefit perceptions of the customers.

H_{06} : Age and occupation do not interact to affect the relational benefit perceptions of the customers.

H_{07} : Gender, age and occupation do not interact to affect the relational benefit perceptions of the customers.

The Sample

The sample of the study constituted of 320 respondents equally distributed into 2x2x2 trivariate bifactorial research design having 40 respondents in each cell of the paradigm. The sample was collected randomly through survey method. The extraneous variables of education, income and marital status were controlled by randomization and elimination.

Tools for Data Collection

The data was collected through a psychometric measure divided into two parts. The first part contained questions regarding demographic information of the respondents, such as gender, age and occupation. Besides this, other information like what type of retail store they generally shop with- traditional or modern, and what was their shopping frequency was also gathered. The second part of the questionnaire contained the relational benefit instrument developed by Gwinner *et al.*, (1998) which has 16 statements to measure customer perception on a five point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”.

Tools for Data Analysis

The raw data was tabulated and relevant statistical tools were used to derive the results. SPSS was employed to compute the accurate statistical values with desirable effectiveness and efficiency.

5. Results and Discussion

Gwinner *et al.*, (1998) identified three relational benefits-confidence, social and special treatment in their study. In the study it was observed that the demographic characteristics of the respondents affect the ranks assigned by them to relational benefits.

Table 1. Ranks assigned to relational benefits

	Males		Females		20-30 Years		35-45 Years		Business		Service	
Relational Benefits	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Confidence	3.39	I	3.39	II	3.33	I	3.46	I	3.39	II	3.40	I
Social	3.34	II	3.41	I	3.30	II	3.45	II	3.44	I	3.31	II
Special Treatment	3.21	III	3.29	III	3.16	III	3.34	III	3.22	III	3.29	III

In India the retail sector is still dominated by traditional convenience stores and the modern retail outlets or shopping malls have come into existence from past decade only. Thus it would be interesting to know that whether any significant difference exists between those consumers who purchase from traditional convenience stores and the customers who purchase from modern retail outlets. Out of the total 320 respondents 152 respondents were shopping from their nearby traditional convenience retail stores while 168 respondents were the customers of modern retail outlets. ANOVA was used to explore the possibility of significant difference between these two sets of consumers. Interestingly no significant difference was observed between these two types of consumers ($F=.052$, $p<0.05$). Amongst these 320 respondents 203 were the frequent visitors to the retail stores i.e. their visiting frequency was at least once in a fortnight while the remaining 117 respondents were infrequent visitors to the retail stores i.e. they were visiting the retail stores only once in a month or occasionally. Significant difference was observed between these two sets of consumers ($F=0.679$, $p<0.05$).

Gender, being an influencing demographic variable, brings differences in the perceptions of male and female customers in assigning ranks to different relational benefits. Male respondents gave highest priority to confidence benefits followed by social and special treatment benefits. Female customers were found to be more concerned about social benefits while confidence and special treatment benefits were assigned second and third ranks in their

priority list. Males may be influenced more by the technical know-how of the employees, image of the store and financial benefits therefore they ranked confidence benefit at the top followed by social and special treatment benefits. Females may be influenced by social benefits such as friendly behaviour of staff, personal recognition and social support therefore they assigned the first rank to this benefit followed by confidence and special treatment. Women trust the service provider only when they are familiar with them while men first trust the service provider and then become friendly thus, the difference in the rankings of male and female consumers are as per their normal behaviour.

However, young-adults (20-30 years) and middle-aged (35-45 years) customers assigned same ranks to these relational benefits where confidence benefits came at first place while social benefits and special treatment benefits came at second and third positions respectively. The business segment customers judged social benefits as highly attractive against service segment customers who judged confidence benefits as highly attractive. Business category customers assigned second and third rank to confidence and special treatment benefits while service category respondents gave second and third preferences to social benefits and special treatments.

Different respondents ranked these relational benefits differently but to test the significant differences the hypotheses-wise results were obtained as per following details. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the seven null hypotheses in terms of inter-level differences and interactions at $p < 0.05$.

- H_{01} was not rejected ($F=0.187$). Thus, gender does not affect the dependent variable i.e., male and female customers do not differ in their relational benefit perceptions.
- H_{02} was rejected ($F=2.216$). Thus, age affects the dependent variable i.e., young-adults and middle-aged customers differ in their relational benefit perceptions.
- H_{03} was not rejected ($F=0.019$). Thus, occupation do not affect the dependent variable i.e., business and service class customers had no differ in their relational benefit perceptions.
- H_{04} was rejected ($F=2.164$). Thus, gender and age interact to affect the customer relational benefit perceptions.
- H_{05} was rejected ($F=2.183$). Thus, gender and occupation interact to affect the customer relational benefit perceptions.
- H_{06} was not rejected ($F=0.205$). Thus, age and occupation do not interact to affect the customer relational benefit perceptions.
- H_{07} was rejected ($F=1.053$). Thus, gender, age and occupation interact to affect the customer relational benefit perceptions.

Traditionally buying has been considered as female dominated activity therefore it is quite natural that female consumers are more interested in relational benefits than the male consumers. Numerous researches have been reported which studied the effect of gender on relationship development (Ndubisi, 2006; Bhagat and Williams, 2008). Babakus and Yavas (2008) in their study found that males are governed by those societal norms that require control, mastery and self-efficacy to pursue self-centered goals while on the other hand females are directed by concerns for self and others and give importance to harmonious relationships with others. Therefore, female customers are believed to be more loyal, relationship-oriented and socially minded over male customers (Ndubisi, 2006; Pan and Zinkhan, 2006). In their study Korgaonkar *et al.*, (1985) observed that female consumers demonstrate a stronger patronage behaviour than male consumers. In the present study no significant impact of gender was observed on the perception of relational benefits of the consumers. This may be because the growth of dual-career families in India has helped in removing the gender differences in the present society and now no task can be considered as gender exclusive.

Age influences the behaviour of the consumers and older people differ from younger people with reference to marketing related phenomena (Wilkes, 1992). Age also influences the relational benefit perception. Though young-adults and middle-aged consumers ranked these relational benefits in the same order they differ significantly in their perception. The mean scores of middle-aged consumers on all the three relational benefits are more than the mean scores of young-adults. It seems that middle-aged consumers consider relational benefits more important than the young-adults. These findings are in line with the views of Wakefield and Baker (1998) who suggested that age controls the consumer response to retail environments. Researchers have found that older consumers rely more on heuristic processing while younger shoppers react more favourably to retailers' efforts for enhancing customer loyalty (Wilkes 1992; Cole and Balasubramanian 1993; Yoon 1997). Occupation has empirically failed to prove its impact on the perception of relational benefits of the respondents in the present study.

6. Conclusion and Implications

Customers understand the importance of relational marketing. They understand that relational marketing is not only beneficial for the organizations but for them also. A strong relationship also provides the customer with the freedom from having to make decisions. The study has significant implications for retailers to frame strategies for the customers on the basis of their demographic profiles. In the present era of microprofiled segmented market, only customized products can bring competitive edge to the organizations. In the present service driven economy the present study suggested the marketers to tailor-made their offerings so that the customers show willingness to build long term relationships with them. However, further research is required to be carried out to understand the relationship between the length of association of customer with the organization and the persistence of relational benefits over the period of association. Taking these variables viz., gender, age and occupation other studies may also be carried out in other service sectors also.

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